

Writing widdershins

A writer's world is a singular place to be, as extraordinary as it is solitary. As writers, we conjure up universes, peopled by all manner of creatures, speaking words of oblique illumination and yet, we all plough a rather lonely furrow. Sometimes our own company is the best we could wish for when ideas land liberally on our doormat, like letters, plump with promise, and all we need to do is open them and begin to write. At others, wracked with self-doubt, we long for some reassurance that the furrow we've chosen is a rich one and our plough management deft. Writing groups, of course, play an important part in our development. The chance to talk through ideas in a receptive environment can be quite a heady experience, if we are firstly able to quell our nerves as we preface a poem we are about to share with the words, "It's something I just threw together," when really it represents weeks of hard slog and careful redrafting of redrafted redrafts.

There are some writers who are blessed with the ability to craft a witty phrase with breath-taking alacrity. There are others, and I count myself among them, who need time for the ideas to take hold and flourish. Whereas others sparkle, I plod. I worry that my writing will seem too simple, too obvious - just too *too*.

There was one occasion, however, when uncharacteristically, I felt emboldened to share my ideas. I had been staying with my good friend Nigel Bird and his wife, Dorothy. Nigel and I had worked at the same school and continued to keep in contact when I moved to Spain and he and Dorothy to France. We visited them both one summer and spent a glorious time looking at his work, exploring his studio and talking into the wee small hours about art, creativity, literature and, in particular, poetry. Perhaps it was this that gave me the confidence to act subsequently with such uncharacteristic artistic abandon.

The following morning, I woke a little after dawn and watched the shifting patterns of light on the curtain, as it was gently lifted by the breeze. There was something about that sight that prompted me to recall an occasion when, as a teenager, I had visited France for the first time on my own. The memory surrounded me with such physical intensity that it was as if I was that young girl once more, wearing her newly-bought perfume and feeling the excitement of a fresh venture bubbling within. I found a scrap of paper and wrote a poem about it. I wanted to write something in thanks for the wonderful evening we'd all shared. Leaving the poem on the kitchen table, I went back to bed and wondered if I had been a little foolish in writing it; I hadn't even redrafted it after all.

I needn't have worried; Nigel was delighted with the poem. The phrase "piston petals" particularly intrigued him and from that moment our collaboration began. He developed a sequence of drawings using that phrase; I then began to send poems he might enjoy and he, equally, sent me sketches. I also created presentations combining Nigel's art and my words for Nigel to look at. There is nothing remarkable about this method of working. We share the same fascination with natural processes and with the environment. Nigel's bold, vibrant abstracts capture so much of what I

see around me and try to convey in words. They enable me, without realising it, to look beyond the shape and the line and in doing so to see the world differently, particularly the processes of erosion, aging and change.

Nigel has recently become curious about how I write. I find this focus interesting as previously I had never really reflected overmuch on how I wrote, I just did it (and then fretted incessantly about its quality). It is proving to be an oddly illuminating experience. I find OneNote extremely useful. I'll take a photo while out on a walk and write a line or two to "fix" the moment or else note down a phrase that's been buzzing around in my head and look for a potential photograph to accompany it. These photo captions then often become the bare bones of a poem. I also have several notebooks in which I jot down my ideas and then, sometimes months later, I'll trawl through pages at random and begin working with some of the ideas there. It was only when I began explaining this to Nigel that I realised that I draft from right to left: I write the first draft on the right-hand side of the page and then redraft on the left. In effect, it's as if I write anti-clockwise. I have since tried drafting from left to right but it's not the same. My instinctive widdershins way of working just seems to suit me. I sent photographs to Nigel of my notebooks to show him what I mean and he in turn is currently working on some diptychs in response to this.

If you visit his website (www.nigel-bird.com) you'll see a presentation entitled "Landmarks" on his Statement page, which shows how our ideas work together. You'll also notice that the same sentence appears on each page of Nigel's website: "The nature of the stimulus informs the method of making". It's not merely that he tries to show what he sees or imagines: that which inspires him becomes an intrinsic part of his art production. That he's now incorporating my method of working into his art (which will then be reflected in the poems I'll write in response) is an extension of his "method of making". This latest stage in our collaboration is incredibly exciting and more than a little unnerving. I really have no idea how things will develop but I'm immensely grateful to Nigel that he has sufficient faith in my poems to take our work together in this new direction.

Haiku is a form that Nigel particularly likes to work with. When we collaborate with anyone, we are inviting them to share and, in doing so, to create new meanings. In the following haiku, I have tried to suggest how potential meanings exist at different levels. The punctuation marks could be the waves the haiku refers to but, then again, they could be the seductive sweep of the curves in Nigel's art work.

invitation

~ within these waves new
worlds beckon; they will yield soon
to(o) our thoughtful nets ~



(Landmarks sequel: Nigel Bird)

Nigel and I are both intrigued by the ways we mark and are marked by the world around us. When I visited the quarry at El Mèdol in Tarragona and stood next to the witness column which showed the depth to which generations of slaves were forced to dig, I thought of further marks: the slaves' scarred flesh reflected in the limestone's appearance. Nigel's chilling art "bears its slave stripes keenly", helping me to make the elusive connection I longed to feel as I placed my hand against the stone.

El Mèdol, Tarragona

The full-throated blare and glare of the CN 340 tears through the August morning,
Service station palms frolic fitfully like ostrich feathers in the hands of wayward girls,
While, deep below, the Via Augusta traces its imperial lineage along antique
channels.

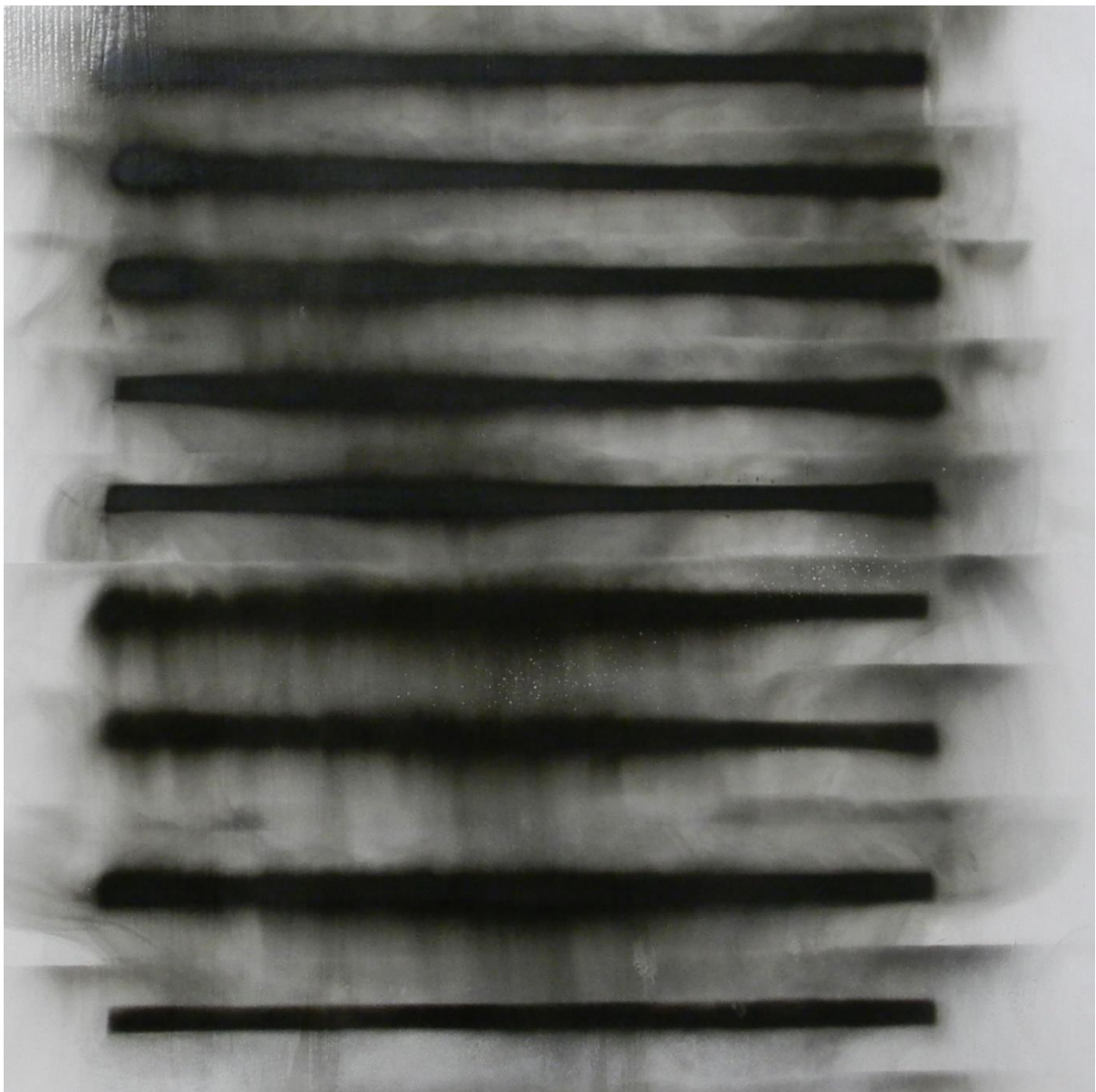
Tarraco's limestone, too workaday for Rome's elite,

Bears its slave stripes keenly, its golden tones,
Marbled in pink and white, sole testament to its provenance.

The percussive beat of feet on gravel falls silent at the sudden shock of the witness
column,

Twenty metres of rough-hewn rock measuring the depth of quarried stone
And quarried flesh, marked by toil and unmarked in death.

My hand cold against the stone stays shackled to my modernity,
No murmuring of ancestral voices speaks to my alien heart,
Silence seals around me like a second skin.



(Levels – 40 x 50cm – carbon deposits and white gloss paint on paper: Nigel Bird)

And now, armed, perhaps, with the same “alien boldness” I refer to in the next poem, it’s time I shared with you the “piston petals” that prompted our collaboration. Although the poem refers to “the joy of those first steps alone”, that doesn’t tell the full story. In sharing my ideas with Nigel, I have found the confidence to be more “widdershins” in my approach. We are all aware of the inherent power in the interaction between words and images. The chance to explore that power with fellow writers, whether they choose to work with words, images or both, is an opportunity not to be missed – take it!

Walking Down to the River

Springtime of 1975, far from home,
And my twin gaolers, Shyness and Self Doubt,
Snore on, replete with recent feasting.

Surprised by the yielding lock’s brisk click,
I feel the sharp spark of an alien boldness within –
And walk out for the first time alone ...

And Rouen opens early morning pavements to me,
Greeting each footstep with glorious echo –
Hope bubbling brimful, sun still drowsy
And me, walking down to the river.

Breathing in the pulse of embryonic air,
I catch another note, a sense of possibilities,
Feeling the thrill of perfume sting my flesh
(My badge of adulthood)
And Life, with laughing eyes, ready to embrace me –

Piston petals of joy hiss and spit in playful glee,
Exultant in ephemeral expectation –
And me, walking down to the river.

‘Que faut-il que je fasse maintenant?’
My tongue tingles with subjunctival potential.
‘Alors, je ne sais pas, moi.’

Decades later, the now of that moment still glistens,
Its membrane, half-stirred by pre-dawn’s half-light,
Trembling at the touch of thought.
Closing my eyes, I see that girl again,
Walking down to the river.

Mid-morning, kneeling among my pot plants, I hear her laughter echoing
As I turn to feel the sun warm my face.
Smiling, by the open gate, she stands with hands outstretched, bidding me follow,
And I am suddenly grateful

That despite the passage of forty years,
I can still feel the joy of those first steps alone,
Walking down to the river
And marvel at such bravery.



(Piston Petals – 113.5 x 73.5 - white gloss paint, carbon deposits and dry cold water on cardboard:
Nigel Bird)

Document by Clare Morris